

Celebrating May as Asian Pacific American Heritage Month

Written by Mike Honda
Monday, 03 May 2010 12:37

Each month of May, our nation pays tribute to the contributions of generations of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) who have enriched our nation's history.

Today, over 16.2 million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders make up one of the fastest growing and most diverse populations in the United States. Each of the 45 distinct ethnic groups and 28 language groups offers a rich history that contributes to the fabric of our nation. By 2050, there will be 40.6 million U.S. residents identifying as Asian alone or in combination with one or more other races, to comprise 9% of the U.S. population. In recognition of the contributions of this diverse population, I am proud to celebrate this May as Asian Pacific American Heritage Month.

The month of May was selected for Asian Pacific American Heritage Month because of two historical events. First, on May 7, 1843, the first Japanese immigrants arrived in the United States, and second, on May 10, 1869, the first transcontinental railroad was completed with substantial contributions from Chinese immigrants.

Today, it is an exciting time to celebrate our vibrant and diverse communities across the country, as the level of civic engagement among AAPIs has increased throughout the years. AAPI leaders serve in today's local and state legislatures across the nation, in states as diverse as California, New York, Texas, Connecticut, Maryland, Ohio, and Iowa.

In Congress, I chair the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC), a bipartisan, bicameral caucus of Members of Congress advocating on behalf of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. CAPAC has reached a record 30 Members this year, and is effectively advocating on behalf of AAPI communities across a wide range of domestic issue areas, including job creation, healthcare, housing, immigration, and education.

President Barack Obama also has a deep understanding of the AAPI community, and many milestones celebrated may be attributed to his commitment to our community. He has made significant outreach efforts through the reestablishment of the White House Initiative on AAPIs to coordinate multi-agency efforts to ensure more accurate data collection and access to services for this community. The Presidential Cabinet includes a record three Asian Americans: Energy Secretary Steven Chu, Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, and Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki. The President has also demonstrated a commitment to judicial diversity through the nomination of high caliber Asian American and other minority jurists at all levels of the federal bench.

However, even with these exceptional milestones crossed by the community, there remains much to be done to ensure that linguistically and culturally isolated Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have access to resources and a voice in our government. CAPAC will be working closely with all stakeholders to represent the voices of the underserved among us.

As we celebrate the history of our community, we also learn from the injustices faced by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders throughout our nation's history, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Japanese American internment, unpunished hate crimes including the murder of Vincent Chin, post-September 11 profiling, discrimination and hate crimes against Sikh and

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Muslim communities, and cultural and linguistic barriers faced in schools, hospitals, and voting booths. Addressing these injustices throughout our nation's history has strengthened and will continue to reinforce the civil rights and civil liberties that make our country a more perfect union.

In this nation founded by immigrants, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have made their mark on our cultural landscape, providing labor for important national infrastructure such as the Transcontinental Railroad, creating jobs for all Americans through entrepreneurship, and leadership in business, government, and civic sectors. Along with my colleagues here in Congress, I am proud to recognize the great diversity of our communities, and celebrate the contributions of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders to our nation.